

There Are 3 Things We Have to Do to Get People Wearing Masks

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Hong Kong has so far reported a grand total of four coronavirus-related deaths, while New York City has reported over 20,000.

Here's another striking comparison: Close to 99 percent of [Hong Kong residents](#) have been wearing masks, to prevent the wearer from spreading the virus, since early February. According to a [mid-April Gallup poll](#), only a third of Americans say they always wear a mask or cloth face covering outside the home. Another third of us sometimes wear a mask in public, and a third never do.

Universal face mask adoption isn't the only difference between Hong Kong and the United States, and it's not a substitute for physical-distancing, hand-washing and other preventive practices. But masks — even just a scarf, bandanna or an [old T-shirt](#) and two rubber bands — are widely [viewed](#) as critical to stopping the transmission of the novel coronavirus.

Nevertheless, face-mask compliance on this side of the Pacific has been uneven. This is especially worrisome in closed, crowded spaces like [subways and buses](#), grocery stores and offices where it's not easy to maintain a distance of six feet from other people and avoid spontaneous coughs and sneezes.

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From unclear to understood: Not long [ago](#), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the surgeon general were lecturing the American public on why they *shouldn't* wear face masks. That recommendation [flipped](#) once it became clear that people infected with the coronavirus can spread it before they know they have it and, therefore, everyone should wear a mask to reduce the chances of infecting others. Since it's hard for people to update their beliefs once a message has been received, it's no surprise that misinformation and outdated news continue to ricochet in the echo chambers of social media.

Unfortunately, it is often easier to dig our heels in than to change our minds, [defending](#) our original position and [discounting](#) new information to justify our behavior. Therefore, it can be helpful to supply people with a rationale to change their behavior without looking like a [hypocrite](#). For example, officials can emphasize that at the start of this crisis, nobody could have known how important it is to wear a mask when you have no symptoms, and that day by day, new [scientific evidence](#) is demonstrating the efficacy of masks in the fight against the coronavirus.

From unconventional to expected: It is human nature to adhere to [social norms](#). When uncertain about what to do, people tend to look around and copy what other people are doing. For instance, if you were

in Hong Kong right now, even if you weren't up to date on the public health imperative, you'd very likely follow the lead of everyone around you and put one on.

How do we create a social norm of mask-wearing when, in fact, so many Americans are doing exactly the opposite? One common [mistake](#) is drawing attention to the lack of compliance. For instance, highlighting [littering](#) as a commonplace problem can inadvertently lead to more littering because it strengthens the perception that littering is the norm. Instead, in press releases and public service announcements, officials should emphasize that the clear [trend](#) in this country is toward universal mask-wearing.

According to a recent Qualtrics study, a [majority of surveyed Americans](#) now say they won't return to the office unless their company makes wearing face masks mandatory. And in just one week in April, the percentage of Americans who said they wore a mask outside the home increased by [more than half](#).

Norms are also established by high-status role models. [Celebrities](#) and professional [athletes](#) can do their part by posting photos about wearing face masks in public. And to counter the [politicized](#) nature of the issue, let's all applaud mask-wearing leaders on both the right and the left. Hurrah for [Melania Trump posting a photo of herself in a mask](#), and hurrah, too, for [Nancy Pelosi](#) wearing a scarf on the House floor.

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